

Duxbury's Debt To Timothy Alden

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torical Society. -- Ed.)

Occasionally a visitor to the Historical Society asks the reason for the enduring fame of John Alden, as did a noted professor at Boston College recently. Often the questions concern the historicity of the legend of the courtship of John and Priscilla immortalized by Longfellow, while some even mention minor anachronisms in the glorious poem. Without doubt the story is one of the brightest elements in Duxbury's history.

SOURCE KNOWN:

Now there is little doubt as to the source of the Longfellow narrative. It was taken from the writings of Timothy Alden, published by him when Longfellow was a little boy and probably written by Alden in Duxbury or Bridgewater long before the birth of Longfellow. Strange to relate, the writings and personality of Timothy Alden are little known in Duxbury, but it was he who preserved this gem of Pilgrim charm. Following is the story as printed on page 265 in volume 3 of his 1844 edition:

"In a very short time after the decease of Mrs. Standish, the captain was led to think, that, if he could obtain Miss Priscilla Mullins, a daughter of Mr. William Mullins, the breach in his family would be happily repaired. He, therefore, according to the custom of those times, sent to ask Mr. Mullins' permission to visit his daughter. John Alden, the messenger, went and faithfully communicated the wishes of the captain. The old gentleman did not object, as he might have done, on account of the recency

of Captain Landis's behavior, he said it was perfectly agreeable to him, but the young lady must also be consulted. The damsel was then called into the room, and John Alden, who is said to have been a man of most excellent form with a fair and ruddy complexion, arose, and, in a very courteous and repossessing manner, delivered his errand. Miss Willing listened with respectful attention, and at last, after a considerable pause, fixing her eyes upon him, with an open and pleasant countenance, said, "prithce, John, why do you not speak for yourself?" He bowed and took his leave, but with a look, which indicated more than his diffidence would permit him otherwise to express. However, he soon renewed his visit, and it was not long before their mutual views were declared in ample form....What report he made to his constituents, after the first interview, tradition does not unfold, but it is said, how true the Arister knows not, that the captain never forgave him to the day of his death."

For a few years, the subject of this article lived in Plymouth and then settled in Oakbury on a farm, which, it is a little remarkable, has remained in the possession of his descendants ever since and is one of the best in the town. He built his house on a rise of land near Eagle Tree Pond, where the ruins of his wall are still to be seen.

Dr. Ernest Ashton Smith, Aiden's biographer, says that Timothy was "burdened with a passion for making waste places productive." This was illustrated by the interest Aiden took in preaching to the Indians in western New York and Pennsylvania where he visited the Senecas and Munsees, and converted the chieftain, "Cornplanter," to Christianity. When he asked the chieftain to explain just why he preferred Christianity to his native Indian faith, Cornplanter replied, "Your religion is in a book," in Aiden's report to the

Missouri society, and the calls of abolitionists and radical newspapers, even from foreign lands, were all silent for the purpose. The slaves themselves almost generally shrank from the thought of being "put out on the streets and told to take their 'chances'" and to "earn their bread."

Note that this was a "half-century" before it was "discovered" by the Europeans.

Hertays the Aldermen of those days were interested in the younger Alden. Was there not also the agent for the Holland Land Company and active as a community leader. I happen to possess many old scribbled documents by the historical William. I found and given into my keeping a valuable map of the Holland Land Company of that part of the State. These were the original ones. The director of the Holland Land Company, Mr. Montgomery, had just requested a photograph of a boy which he features in the museum.

Perhaps even in Germany, learned of the report in a friendly and proper manner. It raised the public opinion in Germany.

Thus far I have been unable to trace the history of the early days of the American Antislavery Society, or, at least, of the question the company was the result of them. In this respect I am eager to find in error on a substitute for whale oil, when Timothy Alden moved his family from New York to Meadville, Pa., the trip was a rugged adventure, which lasted some ten weeks, but the pioneers were stalwart sons of the Puritans.

Some 50 years ago I had to think that Duxbury might have some interesting data on Timothy Alden, but none was to be had.

Years ago I interviewed a noted descendant at Yale University of the chairman of the department of philosophy, who was of the opinion that Timothy was the "great scholar" of the Aiden tradition; note this from one of the luminaries of Yale, the student of Timothy Aiden, having failed of election to the faculty at Harvard.

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William, the first of the line, believed the importance of the military as a source of power and used to invade French-held lands from across the border. He was also a pious man. The king and his court were shown William's letter to the pope in which he asked for help against his enemies. It was evident that the king was determined to help France, even if it meant the failure to pay them for the past. THE KING.

William Brewster's 11-volume diary records his flight at Alderbrook, but not his adventures there. He wrote that "all the post at Alderbrook is devoted to letter-freight, it being known that neither of us can afford to deliver his letters by the express at Newark, and that the post never performs its duty in this respect." It was, therefore, the only way to get his letters to family and friends in Pennsylvania, but it was the most vexatious and expensive language literature method he had to resort to. Alderbrook was the post through Harvard, and Brewster was to receive his letters there.

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THE APPROPRIATE

Now Timothy Allen, who enriched the literary world as poet of Duxbury by his presentation of its most beautiful tractation, was in the fifth generation of a hymn stock from John and Ursula. His father, the Rev. Timothy Allen of Barnstable, served that parish for 30 years, and in the latter years he was a member of the church.

Boston, attired in small clothes, with breeches, knee-buckles, and powdered hair and a wig, he was reverently referred to as the "last colonial."



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My own interest in Timothy Alden is due to the fact that I took my college degree from Allegheny College, which was founded by him in 1815 and where its graduates felt honored in being called "sons of Timothy." Over 20 years ago I discovered this portrait of Timothy in the parish hall of the South Parish in Portsmouth, N.H. Fortunately I secured the portrait as a gift from the church to Allegheny College.

Alden at the age of eight was sent by his father to live with his uncle, Lt. Joshua Alden of Bridgewater, and to attend the Greek and Latin School of the Rev. John Shaw, then notable for having at one commencement in Cambridge furnished about one quarter of the men in the Harvard graduating class.

Timothy's uncle Joshua was a supervisor of the churchyard and "clerk of the mormary" in the old parish there which I served for 31 years and I formed the opinion that Timothy's eight years of residence there had been partly responsible for his "Collection of American Epitaphs and Inscriptions with Occasional Notes," Dr. Ernest Ashmun Smith, Alden's biographer, says it was probably inspired by his fondness for Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."

The mortal remains of Philip De La Noye, founder of the Delane family in America and an original proprietor of Bridgewater, were finally laid to rest in this early churchyard, according to the opinion of William Wing, New Bedford's historian, although an earlier burial had been on a private estate. Some of the early epitaphs have been rather well publicized in modern novels.

THE PLAN

Joshua Alden, it seems, had planned to have Timothy settle on the ancestral estate with its flowing stream, fresh meadows and fertile acres, but Timothy was wont to follow the plow with a Latin text in one hand and to pause overmuch at the end of the furrow. The call of the college in Cambridge was in his blood, going back to the first quarter century of Harvard, so he followed also the steps of his father to Cambridge and forgot the soil and the uncle's entreaty.

The Alden house in Bridgewater repeated the charm of its Duxbury counterpart. Recently a Boston publisher printed a picture of the Duxbury house and called it the High St. House in Bridgewater. Architectural students conclude it was built about 1710, but it probably embodies some of the earlier material built by John and his son Joseph in the early 1640's before the area now known as "Duxbury" Plantation was purchased from the Indians. John Mass-Medwin (Yellow Feather), of Hyles Standish, Daniel Nash and Constant Southworth in 1844. It is generally assumed that it better represents the territory before the purchase, but there is evidence of earlier architecture.